

Kick Start (feat. Steve Harrington as the Original MacGyver) by kay_cricketed

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Summary:

In which Steve fights a pan-dimensional herb garden and loses, and the consequences threaten to derail his tentative friendship with Jonathan and Nancy.

On the other hand, he puts together some cool stuff.

Kick Start (feat. Steve Harrington as the Original MacGyver)

Author's Note:

Regarding the sex pollen (for lack of a better description), it only serves as an amplifier. Steve only wants what he's already wanted except at a higher pitch, whether it's related to sexual attraction, platonic comfort, good music, etc. It's kind of awful but also bearable, so there are no major consent issues in this story. His needs are not always sexual in nature, so there is some emotional manipulation.

Things I learned while writing this: *Stranger Things* is set too early for a MacGyver reference, but not for Inspector Gadget.

i.

To be fair, Dustin probably didn't *mean* to expose Steve to a brain-altering, life-ruining alien substance during one of the lowest points of his life.

And that wasn't Steve being generous. Dustin was a lot of things—a ridiculous pain in the ass being the least of them—but he didn't have a malicious bone in his body. And the kid had obviously decided at some point—maybe when they were loping along the rail tracks buried in decomposed leaves, comparing notes on fickle girls and hair products, or maybe when Steve clutched him close in the dark of the tunnel and closed his eyes and *held the fuck on* while monsters skittered around their hips—that Steve was “okay.” Actually, what he said was, “You’re an okay guy.”

“Just okay?” Steve asked. He balled up the end of his sleeve in his fist, blotted at the grimy smear he could feel across his forehead, and gave Dustin a Look. He was at the Henderson's trying to brick up the demodog-shaped hole in the cellar wall before Dustin's mom noticed.

He'd finished two rows of bricks, more or less in straight lines. There was mortar under his fingernails. It was *Saturday* for fuck's sake. All of that merited more than *okay*.

Dustin squinted at him in the crappy lighting, fidgeting. "You know what I mean."

"Do I?"

"Are you, like—are you fishing for compliments? Do you want me to say you're the fairest of them all? That you're like Han Solo, if Han Solo had your hair but didn't have an aerodynamically primed spaceship capable of lightspeed?"

Steve opened his mouth. Then he closed it.

Dustin grinned at him, all toothy. "Steve Harrington," he drawled, an octave higher than usual. "*Steve Harrington*, you're the *coolest*."

"Oh my god," said Steve. "Shut up, dickweed."

"You make the High Elves weep, Steve—"

"The who? The fuck?"

Dustin gurgle-growled at him, which was about twelve times too many that he'd made that noise in Steve's general direction. Steve rolled his eyes and ducked back under the arch of the opening in the wall. He fumbled for his makeshift trowel—it was actually Mrs. Henderson's pie scoop pilfered from the silverware drawer—and smoothed another layer of mortar over the bricks. God, the dirt stunk back here. Like Dustin's little demonspawn had vomited and buried the evidence.

"Hey," he called, even though he could feel Dustin hovering at his heels. "Did you check back here to make sure, uh—*Dart*—didn't leave anything behind?"

"Yep, I totally checked."

"Right. And the lab burnt this whole tunnel to shit, like the others?"

“They burnt most of it to shit,” said Dustin. “I think. I mean, probably? It’s not like I *crawled in the dimensional portal* to check.”

Steve stared into the pitch black beyond, an itch on the back of his neck. He wasn’t sure whether it was cold sweat breaking out or something—else. The tunnel was small and low: crawling room only. The air smelled foul and stale. He rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand, but the grubby feeling clung like a film to his skin. The longer he stared into that nothingness, the more his vision and imagination teamed up to screw with him, sensing shapes where there were none.

“It’s probably fine,” he finally said.

Dustin shifted in his periphery. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to.

“Fuck,” Steve said. He scooted out of the hole and sat back on the floor, feeling the kind of tired that physically hurt. His car keys were in his pocket, and he fished them out. “Here,” he said, offering the ring to Dustin.

Dustin took the keys, his forehead scrunched up. “What?”

“Glove box. My lighter and my emergency can of hairspray. Get ‘em.”

“Your hair doesn’t look that bad.”

“I’m gonna make a flamethrower,” said Steve.

Dustin gaped at him. Then, with deep and abiding reverence, he said, “Steve Harrington, you’re the *coolest*.”

ii.

The idea made complete sense at the time. Totally not an overreaction. Totally not the long nights of insomnia and paranoia creeping up on him, or a kneejerk reaction to the dreams where the

ground crumbled beneath Hawkins' foundations and ate the town in a rotting maw. Steve was only being sensible. And it'd make Dustin feel safer, right? Well, what the hell else was he good for these days?

He burned around the perimeter of the opening first, until the cinderblocks and the mismatching brick pattern he'd been laying out blossomed black. The lingering stench of decay went with it, and made Steve feel brave. He checked the tunnel again—stuck his arms in first, wiggling until his shoulders scraped past rock and soil rained down briefly into his hair. “Shit,” he said, and like an idiot squeezed in further. Against his elbows, the sides of the narrow space felt meaty and slick, directly out of his nightmares.

“Such a bad idea,” said Dustin, although he still sounded excited about the whole flamethrower thing. He was probably dreaming up a dozen ways to use the newfound knowledge to get himself killed.

“Shut up,” Steve said. He wasn't sure if the kid could hear him, though.

Just like spraying weeds, Harrington, he thought to himself. He shook the can of hairspray, the clunka-clunk almost too loud against the oppressive pressure of not knowing what was in front of him.

When he snapped the lighter on, the flicker illuminated enough to make Steve decide the idea was still, in fact, a good one. He couldn't leave this shit show beneath Dustin's house. Near his *family*.

He aimed and let loose.

It wasn't the relief of a nail-studded bat smashing into a demodog's muzzle, but the billowing flame coming out of the Farah Fawcett nozzle settled something antsy in Steve's stomach. The acid churning eased. His head emptied. Fire was a clean, neat blade into the dark. It devoured the dried-up husks of pale, clinging vines that resembled human hair caught between pebble and clay mosaics. There was dead skin, maybe even Dart's, scraped across the wall that shriveled and blackened and disappeared.

Behind the flames, the tunnel was cramped and dead. Steve had enough time to see that it had been blocked in ahead from a landslide

of muck and shale, eliminating some of his fear about how far he'd need to go inside, when the whole thing blew up in his goddamn face.

Literally.

It was a—black spindly *thing* scuttling out of the crevices. A weird-ass bunch of thistle? It was—fuck fuck *fuck* fuck—then he was squirming back with no traction, re-aiming the hairspray can and the lighter. When the flame curled into its roots, the thing *shrieked*, soundless but somehow overwhelming, a quivering death note that Steve felt in his blood. Like a needle into his pulse, sending his heart and lungs spasming.

He didn't actually see it happen. He absorbed the noise, shielded his eyes from a sudden rush of movement, heard Dustin behind him, shouting—

Then Steve couldn't breathe. His fingers found purchase in the dirt. Clawed.

Pulled earth free in clumps. Clawed.

He wasn't there, for a while.

He burned.

(So it wasn't Dustin's fault. Not really. As usual, Steve was the common denominator in all of his own fuckups.)

iii.

He woke up roasting beneath a lump of scratchy blankets that smelled like cat and old burrito. The ceiling was moving in a strange way. His breathing was loud, rasping in his throat with an uncanny echo.

Somewhere nearby, Dustin was panicking.

“I don’t *know* what’s wrong with him! That’s why I need a functioning adult. Mine’s down for the count, shithead!”

Aw, thought Steve, something like affection bursting hot and prickly in his chest. He relished its bite. *I’m his functioning adult. Cool.* Nevermind that Steve was pretty sure he barely qualified as either of those things on a good day.

“*Thank* you. Jeez. Wait, is Nancy with you?”

Steve, who’d been wiggling free of the blankets, froze at her name. He listened, mouth dry. His fucking *hips* had pulsed at each syllable in her name, like each one was a bruise on his skin. He didn’t know his hips could do that. That was—that was a new thing.

“He wouldn’t want her here. Can’t *you* just come?” Dustin made a huffing sound—he was in the hallway, Steve realized, stretching the phone cord as far as it would go—and kicked something over.

“Whatever,” he finally said. “Just hurry? Please?” His voice cracked on the last word.

Steve finally emerged out of the labyrinth of blankets encasing him. There were like four, all wound around and in between his limbs like a living cat’s cradle. Overkill, but sweet. He swung his legs off the bed—Dustin’s bed? No, definitely his mom’s with that floral pattern. That was even weirder. How had he gotten here? He didn’t remember anything after the tunnel. Steve had dropped weight since their latest near-death experience (latest, for chrissake), but he was still more bulk than Dustin could drag out of the tunnel and up the stairs and into the house on his own. Which meant Steve had walked under his own power. Maybe. Sort of.

When he thought about it, he might remember—something like that. Dustin panting under his arm. “One more step, big guy,” he’d said, sounding tinny and far away. “I gotcha,” he’d said, too, and Steve had believed him.

He stared blankly at the wall.

There was dirt smeared down his arms and caked between his

fingers, soiling the sheets. His skull itched something fierce. He couldn't breathe properly. Every pull of oxygen lit an acrid trail down his esophagus and did nothing to cool the roiling in his gut. "Wow," said Steve, and wet his lips where they were cracked and sore. He felt—sunburnt. He felt—strange.

"Steve! Shit, you scared the crap out of me!" Dustin hauled himself back into the room by the door frame, his eyes wide. He *did* look scared, and Steve felt his heart sink.

"Did I... get it?" he asked, feeling out the words as they shaped behind his teeth. They didn't feel like his words.

"Yeah, but it tried to take you down with it. You were... It got you right in the face with some kind of nasty purple stuff."

Steve touched his cheekbone. It throbbed, the same low-level ache it had since Hargrove broke the shit out of it, but he didn't feel anything unusual.

"I cleaned you up," said Dustin, helplessly. "And I laid you down? You were sort of—shaking. And you looked really out of it."

"Did you touch it?"

"What?"

"The purple stuff." As weird as he felt, Steve knew the answer was important. Alarm bleated beneath the disassociation that was dragging him down, like a flare sunk beneath the surface and disappearing into an indefinite quagmire. He thought about Dustin and his caps, his whistle-sigh. Dustin, dragging him by his ankles from the tunnel.

"No," Dustin said, his hands convulsing around the hem of his t-shirt as if to underscore the answer. "No, no way. I was careful."

"You need to call the Chief," Steve told him.

"Uh, you totally killed the threat. It's burnt toast."

"We don't know that. We don't know *anything*."

Dustin inched closer. He looked like he wanted to touch Steve but couldn't bring himself to reach out. "I called the Byers," he offered. "Will's brother is coming over to check it out. And to make sure you're not gonna kick it."

Steve closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, ignoring the jolt of pain. "I'm not gonna kick it."

"You *just said* we don't know anything."

"Well, I know one thing. Lay off."

He heard Dustin take a few steps closer. There was a careful press of fingers to his temple. "You've got a fever or something," Dustin whispered. "I could fry an actual egg on your face."

The contact quieted something in Steve. He let the pull drag him under for a while, to a place where he could hear the slow juddering march of his heartbeat as it explored the perimeters of his body, until he became conscious that Dustin was saying his name in increasingly fevered panic, and had been, maybe, for a while.

"What," he slurred.

Dustin wouldn't assemble in his vision—he was a messy splattering of color and noise that was too close for comfort. He wasn't touching Steve anymore; disappointment curdled in Steve when he realized. Without that cornerstone, he felt bereft and—and *lonely*.

Like a black hole had opened up inside of him.

No. Like someone had ripped open some stitches, and now he was bleeding out and everyone could see the fucking show.

iv.

So, Steve knew about the black hole. Nothing made the hole, okay? It had been there since he was a kid. It grew shy and unnoticed until it

was too late to do anything about it. Sex didn't fill it. Shared lukewarm beer that still tasted like Tommy and Carol's spit didn't fill it. Not even Nancy's studious way of examining him and finding something worthwhile filled it, although she'd come the closest. The way she would lean into his side as if his bones were more comfortable than he knew them to be. The way she kissed him while meeting his eyes. Her curls, defying her sense of order.

But whatever needlework Nancy had put in place, it wasn't there long enough to take. Steve wasn't deluded enough to believe the yarn split at a word—*bullshit*, even though it echoed between his ears at his lowest, couldn't have undone her careful work. It was a long-term fraying. Most of it was Steve's fault, born out of his carelessness and cruelty. Nancy hadn't even realized the work in progress existed. He wouldn't hold her to its completion.

And he meant what he'd said. It was okay.

But the stupid fucking neediness—whatever it was—started to scream in the back of his brain after she was gone. Steve crammed it somewhere low and isolated in hopes it would rot. He was sick of parties and pretending things were normal and doing what it took to feed the beast. His whole life seemed, on the other side of the Upside Down, to be such a fucking farce.

But instead of withering, it continued to grow. It got bigger every time he woke up to an empty house and found only his own crusty dishes piled in the sink. Every time Nancy gave Jonathan Byers that private, trusting smile in the hallways when they passed. Every night Steve woke heaving in the dark, terrified of the spaces around him that remained invisible, layered over a place of decay and death that he couldn't escape.

And now, for whatever reason, the black hole was high in his chest and it was *hungry*. He was struck, suddenly, by an immovable fear that nothing would ever satisfy that hollow concave, that he'd starved it so long it would swallow him up.

(He'd known, even before Nancy ripped down the curtain between them at that stupid party, he would always want more than anyone could give him. His yearning was the stuff of outer space: a void that

filled itself with silent stretches between hulking planets, always hoping to find life. And she'd looked at Jonathan—this weird nerd with his stalker photography and furtive eyes and scarecrow hair—this guy who knew exactly who he was and where he was going in a way that would've made Nancy sick with jealousy—and Steve *got it*, now that he was as lost as Nancy had been, now that he was just clueless as to how to regain his bearings, how she could look on Jonathan and want him as keenly as she did. And that was a secret Steve Harrington intended to take to his grave.)

v.

He slept a while. Sometimes he stirred, but Dustin was always there in the shadows, which meant Steve was safe. He sunk again into dreamless sleep.

Then, it wasn't just Dustin. Steve felt someone smooth his hair.

He mumbled something about messing up the styling, but she didn't stop. She said his name quietly and tucked sweat-damp strands behind his ears, stroking root to tip. She'd done that, before. He loved that about her.

"Steve," she said, like something had pained her.

"Hey," he breathed, arching into her touch. It woke up his limbs, sliding needles into his feet, his muscles trembling.

"Should we take him to a hospital?" Jonathan asked. He sounded worried and a little pained himself.

Steve twisted in the bed to try and see him. His eyelashes were gummy and stuck, though, so all he caught was an impression of Jonathan's shape against the sallow lamplight. Someone was panting soft-like into the stillness. It was him, he realized belatedly, making—noises.

"No hospitals," said Dustin. "What if the government tries to take him

away like they did Will? We can't risk it."

"We don't know what that thing's done to him," Nancy said. Her terseness didn't extend to her touch, though. She had tenderly palmed the side of Steve's face and was brushing her thumb over his cheekbone, over and over.

He sighed into her skin without meaning to. Felt his breath catch hot and full in her palm, the way she shivered. It hooked on something in his belly and below. Twisted him up inside. He was—for fuck's sake, he was getting hard.

Somehow, that woke Steve up faster than any of the other weird sensations had.

"What the actual hell," he said. The weakness of his voice was as much a shock as the reason behind it.

He was in Mrs. Henderson's bedroom again. Nancy and Jonathan were there, watching him with caution. Dustin waited anxiously by the door, his hands full of Tews, her tiny furry body squirming against his embrace. And Steve had a boner and a stomach full of glass.

He could excuse the tug of arousal when he looked at Nancy—it was a given—but he didn't expect the twin sensation when he met Jonathan's gaze intent on him from the foot of the bed. There was a partial zipper mark and pillow crease on his jaw, like he'd bunched one of Nancy's cheap throw pillows up beneath his head while they were sprawled out studying, which was, actually, exactly what Steve used to do when he was listening to Nancy recite facts about whaling pods.

Steve stared back, speechless. He wanted to—touch that mark. He wanted to feel it against his fingertips and he wanted—his heart thundered—wanted to bite gently against that same impression and —

He didn't know he was *moving* until Nancy pushed him back.

"Steve?" she asked, again. She took her hand away from his shoulder

and it *throbbed*. “Does anything hurt?”

Everything, he thought, despondency swelling painful in his chest.

vi.

“What if you’ve been infected and it’s laid eggs in your stomach,” Dustin tried protesting, along with other variations of “but *Steve*” and “but the party should *know*.”

Steve didn’t want the party or Hopper or *anyone* to know shit about the fact that he’d tried setting an alien root on fire and it spat in his face and now he couldn’t help but get a boner when Nancy (when *Jonathan*) so much as breathed in his direction. As far as he was concerned, that was need-to-know information. And Steve was the only one who actually needed to know, considering it was *his* body fucking him over.

“Nothing laid eggs in me,” he said, for maybe the fourth time.

Dustin threw his arms up in the air. He hadn’t stopped pacing down the hallway and back into the living room since Steve hobbled his way out to the couch. “We don’t know that! I mean, look at Dart. I thought I found a cute new species of pollywog, but it turned into some kind of small murder lizard that ate my cat. What if you’ve got parasites now? What if you eat my cat? I *just got a new cat*, Steve.”

Steve looked at him.

Dustin glared and pointed at him. “Don’t even pretend it’s not a possibility.”

“He’s got a point,” said Jonathan.

“Don’t you start—”

“Not about the cat,” Jonathan interrupted, with more patience than Steve expected when considering the interrupted study date. “But we

don't even know what got to you or if there are more around. We've got to call the Chief."

"And we've got to close up that hole in your cellar," Nancy told Dustin, grimly. She kept peering out through the window blinds at the doors set into the ground. The afternoon had fallen away while Steve was unconscious; twilight had dug its talons into the sky, cutting dark swathes through the cloud cover. Dustin turned all the lights on outside and flooded the pavement in harsh monochrome. It wasn't much of an improvement.

Steve deeply, desperately wanted someone to touch him again. He mashed his fists against his forehead and ground his knuckles in hard.

"Fine," he said, at last. "We can call the Chief."

Jonathan and Nancy exchanged glances; they'd perfected their silent communication well before Steve could begin learning the language. Without a word, Jonathan turned and disappeared around the corner to the hall where the phone was stationed. Nancy watched him go, then turned to Dustin and touched his arm.

"When does your Mom get home?"

Dustin looked up at her and deflated. "Probably in another hour? Two if the Force is strong with her tonight. She can get pretty caught up in her marbles game, and Steve was supposed to feed me."

"Sorry, buddy," said Steve. He meant it. He took a dumb amount of pride in being a semi-decent babysitter these days. "D'you want me to fix something?"

"Not in your condition," Nancy said. "I can probably handle some mac and cheese, though, if you've got it boxed."

"What do you take me for?" Dustin asked.

She smiled and put an arm around him. "C'mon, then," she said, leading him forward. "Steve?"

"Yeah?" He watched them go and felt like a tether had gone taut

around his chest.

“You’re coming where I can see you, too.”

Steve probably should’ve been insulted. It wasn’t like he needed babysitting, too, no matter what kind of emotional sucker wound he’d been saddled with. But it meant being close to her, and the world hinged on that closeness, so he followed them in an unsteady line. In some ways, this was familiar.

If he could look on Nancy, just look on her, that was enough. It always had been.

vii.

Hopper was a pain in the ass to get a hold of, but when that hurdle was passed, he was pretty good to have in a pinch. His truck grumbled into the driveway and stopped an inch from the lip of the garage like he was daring it to move first. Jonathan went out to meet him, and Steve, Nancy, and Dustin surveyed their progress from the windows as the two men vanished into the cellar for an uncomfortably long time. The only reason Steve didn’t panic was because he could see the beam of their flashlight cutting across the opening of the cellar doors every so often—proof of life.

“You should eat something,” Nancy told him. She was watching him, the way he’d curled in on himself on the carpet. “There’s still about a cup of mac and cheese left.”

“As much as I’d like to savor your culinary masterpiece,” said Steve, “I’m not feeling too hot. Have to take a rain check.”

Nancy huffed out a breath, delicately holding a window blind open to create a gap. She looked outside, but it wasn’t long before Steve seemed to catch her attention again.

“Nausea? Headache?”

“Ground chuck,” Steve confirmed glumly. “No headache, though.”

“Anything else?”

Steve buried his face in his hands rather than admit to the inconvenient erection that was approaching painful. He’d stuffed a throw pillow in his lap just in case anyone looked too close for comfort, but somehow the presence of something bulky between his thighs was only making it *worse*. “Just kill me. Hargrove would like that,” he muttered.

“Sorry. It sounds like you’ll live.” She was smiling at him—he didn’t have to see her face to know it. “Any final requests, just in case?”

“Can I have your car?” Dustin asked.

“You little traitor,” Steve said. “Blood of my own, conspiring against me.”

He didn’t actually know where the phrasing came from, but he’d heard Dustin use it before when re-enacting a party game. As expected, Dustin lit up and beamed at him like he’d announced the second coming.

Footsteps clumped up the steps and the sliding door creaked open. “You goddamn kids,” said Hopper. “You couldn’t just make a phone call and ask for a professional. You had to play Inspector Gadget.” To Steve, he added, “Nice masonry. Or it was, before you blew your can of hairspray up on it, genius.”

“The Upside Down?” Nancy asked, every inch wired and unwilling to relax.

Hopper shook his head and shoved his hat back. “Couldn’t find any sign of it. Just whatever was left behind, and that’s long gone, too. A few charred limbs, is all.”

Jonathan drifted into Steve’s vicinity; he smelled like musty earth and the medicinal burn of chemical fire. He was too close. Steve pulled himself in tighter and tried not to pump his knee with the jitters.

(He wanted to—he just wanted—if he could only lean against someone solid, skin to skin, that would be—but no. Fuck, what was *wrong* with him?)

“I’ll call the doc,” Hopper was saying. “He can take what’s left of it. Give us some idea of what to expect, if anything.” He hadn’t turned off his flashlight and now he shone it in Steve’s face, which was both incredibly annoying and, to Steve’s relief, incredibly distracting. “Hospital or no hospital?”

“No hospital,” Steve said.

“Hospital,” said Nancy.

“Hell no,” said Steve with *feeling*.

“Compromise,” Jonathan said, after the silence stretched to breaking. “No hospital, but he stays at my house the rest of the weekend for observation.”

It was on the tip of Steve’s tongue to lie that his parents were home, and would be waiting, and would watch over him. But he looked at Jonathan, and Jonathan looked back at him, and Steve knew with a sudden shock of discomfort that Jonathan already knew he was alone.

(*Don’t let Nancy have told him*, Steve thought, sick on the idea. She couldn’t have—she wouldn’t have—but he thought that, anyway. It was a disservice to her. But yeah, he thought that, anyway.)

“That could work,” Nancy said, thoughtful. She was chewing her lip and it was doing another batch of horrible things to Steve’s stomach. “Could I...?”

“Yeah, of course.” Jonathan smiled at her.

“It makes sense. Your mom—”

“She’d know better than anyone what alien possession looks like.”

“Not possessed,” said Steve, but his heart wasn’t in it.

He was just—so tired.

Hopper reached out and clasped the back of his skull. It was entirely unexpected, and Steve held himself very still as his skin buzzed and his ears burned and his mouth hummed with unspoken pleas. “Gonna hang in there?” Hopper asked, shaking Steve’s head like he was a dog or something.

Steve hoped he wasn’t as flushed as he felt. “Hanging,” he said, like a moron. “Uh. Just fine here.”

“He’s *dying*,” said Dustin. “Isn’t anyone listening to him besides me?!”

Hopper held on a beat longer, his fingers knotted in Steve’s hair. He was frowning, but fuck if Steve knew why. When he finally let go—and wasn’t that a goddamn gut punch—it was with care, the sort that made Steve suddenly remember that Hopper was the one who examined his face after Hargrove busted it up. He’d touched Steve then, too, holding him up to Joyce Byers’ unreliable oven light and turning his chin back and forth, before at last announcing the mess to be a “nasty piece of work” but ultimately “salvageable.”

(“Heard you protected those kids,” he said in an even-measured tone. Steve had given him a miserable sort of grin, teeth tacky with blood.

“More like those kids protected me,” he said.

Hopper dropped a pack of frozen corn on his lap. “It’s a crappy feeling, isn’t it,” he said, and wasn’t wrong.)

viii.

“Will you call me?” Dustin asked as they were shuffling out the door.

Steve shivered in the cooling night and turned to him. “Nancy’s gonna stay with you until your mom’s home,” he said. “You won’t even miss me. Promise.”

“I’ll want to know,” Dustin insisted. “I’ll just freak out if you don’t.”

Behind him, Nancy studied Steve. Her appraisal was a lead weight to his emotions; he couldn’t help but feel wanting. “I’ll call,” he said, exhaling.

Then, because Dustin’s fear cleared from his expression and it was such a shit show he had to worry about monsters more than math, Steve added, “When I come back to get my car, maybe we can go for a drive.”

“Bitchin,” said Dustin.

Jonathan opened the car door for him. Steve looked at him, and the interior of the car, and his own muddied sneakers for some direction. “Bitchin,” he echoed and then climbed inside.